



# A guide to natural supports

**This booklet will provide a basic guide and some introductory ideas around facilitating natural supports for people with disabilities, and touches on some examples of their uses, how they might be developed or enhanced, and where they might be found. It also looks at what a human service worker's role might be in supporting these to occur and how to go about doing some of this work.**

There is much that is not covered in this booklet, and it is simply a guide rather than a manual. One of the areas that is not addressed is that of maintaining relationships (natural supports), and safeguarding them into the future. Another is the contribution these relationships can provide in building a good life with a person into their future. These are incredibly important subject matters; nonetheless, they have not been addressed in this brief guide.

This booklet may provide some indicators and raise some conversations, and it comes from the place of belief in the importance of relationships in every person's life. Suggestions for further reading are included on the back of this resource.

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# List of basic assumptions

- No disability precludes relationship – ‘All means All’
- People with or without disabilities need to be in control of the relationships they want and have – ‘nothing about us without us’
- People with disabilities have something to give to relationships and communities – they are contributors
- Inclusive living means life in the community and not segregated options
- Start with what people do have rather than what they don’t, and include their passions, interests and dreams
- Natural supports generally refer to unpaid relationships, although these relationships may develop out of paid services or interactions
- Natural supports can occur independently, or can be crafted and supported intentionally by others
- Natural supports can have a purpose or role, or quite simply be for relationship’s sake
- There are no rules for how relationships look or operate, nor any rules for how, where and with whom they form
- A definition: “Natural supports are sources of support that come directly from people and communities rather than being provided through formal ‘paid’ forms of support.” (Michael Kendrick)

# What

Natural supports are the relationships we all have every day in our lives – unpaid, informal, ordinary relationships. These might be with a neighbour, a friend, someone in a local café, a family member, a housemate, a teacher or mentor etc.

Some examples of natural support contributions include giving someone a ride somewhere, an introduction, companionship, listening, friendship, problem solving or even neighbourly support like collecting your mail while you are away.

We have relationships that are foundational – those that are closest to our heart. These can be immediate family or relationships that emerge through our lives such as intimate relationships or children. We can also have significant relationships with people we consider friends – people who you can count on and who can count on you.

We also have relationships with people who share an interest or hobby, a neighbourhood, or a work place. These are people who we are generally involved with due to our participation in some activity, club, workplace, study place, or even neighbourhood.

The last noteworthy group in our lives involves economic exchange. These are the people with whom we have a relationship with because they provide a service to us and are paid to do so. They may include, doctors, taxi drivers, retail assistants, librarians etc.

## Some examples of natural supports

All examples included in this resource are based on real people but names have been changed.

Sam owned and worked in a local neighbourhood café, and made great coffee, Carolyn was a woman who lived up the road from the cafe, in a shared group home. Carolyn spent much time in Sam's café and slowly they got to know each other. They discovered they had a shared love of AFL and both supported Collingwood. Sam and Carolyn began going together to watch their team play, as often as they could – if the weather was too bad, they would watch it at either one of their houses – but watching with a fellow supporter was paramount. Nowadays, Sam and Carolyn have become great friends, Sam is involved in Carolyn's life, and visa versa. This is a reciprocal friendship, enjoyed by both parties, which started from a shared passion.

Susan has a circle of support that meet once a month. One woman was invited in particular because she shared Susan's love of horses and horse riding. This woman has a small farm, and several horses and donkeys. After some discussion, Susan spent a day a week at this woman's farm, tending to the horses, and learning how to show the donkeys in competitions alongside her new friend.

After talking with Tom and hearing what it was that Tom enjoyed, his support worker found him a voluntary role in a garden centre. Tom and his support worker went along each week for a day, and began to get to know the staff. The staff in turn began to get to know Tom. Eventually Tom told his support worker not to come along any longer as he was fine on his own. The staff enjoyed Tom's contribution both to the work environment and the tasks he was fulfilling. This workplace ended up employing Tom, his workmates assisted him as he learnt the role, they trained him to use the equipment, and they taught him to drive a small forklift. Tom eventually became the housemate of one of his work mates. A fantastic culmination of natural supports in action.

### Points to consider:

- Relationships are dynamic and people may move from becoming more or less intimate in our lives and having different roles in our lives
- It is often through shared activity – groups, clubs, shared passions, schools, even workplaces – that new relationships are formed. Hence having valued roles that create opportunities for contribution, reciprocity and belonging is vital for nurturing these friendships
- People with disabilities often have lives which are heavy with people providing economic exchange, and can be lacking people who are friends – hence people are often vulnerable to loneliness and social isolation
- Promoting better lives for people includes an intentional focus on genuine participation in the community at all levels, with a view to assisting friendships to develop.

# Why

It has been suggested that one of the most fundamental and essential elements of our lives is that of meaningful relationships with others.

For people who are considered marginalised in our society these relationships can occur less frequently, and when bureaucracies, service systems, and professionals become involved in people's lives, these can often reduce the space for unpaid (naturally occurring) relationships to be present.

The prevalence of paid support in people's lives can leave people with disabilities at heightened risk of social isolation; this in turn would suggest an increased risk of not having a full and meaningful life – 'the good life'. O'Brien & Mount (2007) suggest that the five valued experiences and accomplishments are:

- **belonging,**
- **being respected,**
- **sharing ordinary places,**
- **contributing, and**
- **choosing.**

Every single aspect of these experiences and accomplishments involves relationships with other human beings.

As a result of increased relationships (amongst other things including self determination, achievement of goals or dreams), reports have indicated generally people are more settled, and quite simply happier. Quality of life improvements have also been reported by young people, particularly around greater self determination, control and autonomy achieved with increased relationships (CREDO East Evaluation Report, 2006, the Circles Initiative, the Circles Network).

Hence it is vital that paid supporters in the lives of people with disabilities consider the importance of having a focus on assisting people to develop unpaid, freely given relationships in their lives.

Maria, a 27 year old woman, lives in a shared group home with 4 other people in the north of Melbourne. She attends a day service 5 days a week. It is about an hour's drive across town. She has intermittent contact with her family and no other friends outside of disability services. Maria is passionate about jewellery making, reading and libraries, roses, and great coffee and the café scene. Maria does not like big crowds or large groups, but enjoys her own time or spending it with another friend talking quietly. Maria's activities at the services she is part of currently consist of painting, bowling, cooking, and dancing. Due to the restrictions of staffing at both the day service and her living environment, these are all group activities, with between 3-10 people in attendance at each one.

- Is there space for Maria's life to look different, and be more in line with what she is interested in?
- How might staff begin to support Maria to have the life she wants?

Maria lives in a small granny flat on the edge of the inner suburbs of Melbourne. The people who live in the house in front of Maria are a part of Maria's friendship network and support her with her household tasks (putting out the rubbish bin etc). In exchange, Maria maintains their beautiful front and back yards, full of roses. Maria has practiced and become confident using public transport, and so heads off each morning to a café on the tram, and reads the daily paper, while drinking coffee. Maria attends a local community centre where they run a jewellery making course once a week. She has met some people there, and has been invited to join them for coffee on the weekends some times. Maria is now considering expanding her enjoyment of craft into other areas such as knitting, and crocheting – and would like to sell her goods at the local markets each week. Maria still has paid supports in her life, who assist her with many things. These workers listen to her and help her to become involved in her community, and support Maria to build relationships at a pace she is comfortable with.

### Points to consider:

- People who live within supportive relationships are less likely to become ill or die prematurely
- Social relationship also reduces the likelihood of mental illness
- Social relationship contributes to the wellbeing of people
- Social relationship positively influences our sense of personal control
- People who have few advocates in their lives need paid supporters to assist them to find meaningful relationships.

# How

How we go about supporting people to enrich their lives via relationships (natural supports) is often complex and time consuming work, while being highly rewarding work.

Most importantly this involves getting to know the person concerned – engaging in a relationship with the person and gaining some understanding of what matters to them.

- **Who is this person, and what are they telling us about their hopes and dreams?**
- **What do they value and who would they like to spend their time with?**
- **What is this person's community of choice? Where do they want to spend their time?**
- **Who are the people currently involved in this person's life (paid and unpaid)?**
- **What opportunities do these people bring; and what resources exist that could be built on (people, places, financial, and physical)?**

These are some of the questions that if explored with the person (and those that care about them), can lead to the heart of an individual, assisting us to hear this person's vision of a good life.

Establishing and accessing valued and contributing roles can be one helpful way to establish pathways into community groups, and from there begin to craft relationships with people in these groups who have common interests.

The role of a support worker can be critical in assisting relationships to develop – intentionally seeking out and identifying opportunities for people to interact and get to know a person with a disability. Equally, knowing when to step back and allow these relationships to grow, flourish and develop their own life, is an important skill.

George is a 25 year old man who lives in his own place in the suburbs of Melbourne. George has been living independently for 2 years, with the support of his family; he has developed a circle of support made up of family and friends around him who meet monthly. George has his own car and drivers licence, and he is studying part time. George has a mild intellectual disability, cerebral palsy and chronic fatigue syndrome. This means he uses a wheelchair, and needs to rest periodically through the day, so his available energy for activities is limited to the mornings.

George identified that he would like to find meaningful work. He had communicated for some time a desire to work in the emergency services. The members in his circle of support began spending time exploring this dream of George's, finding out why he was so passionate about this work, and what might sit underneath this desire. Most of all, this required of his circle to believe in George, and take him seriously!

George wanted to contribute in a meaningful way. Someone in the circle was chosen (because they were a tenacious and good 'asker'), who rang the senior fire officer in the region. After some discussion, explaining who George was and the skill set he would contribute to the fire service, the fire officer agreed to meet with George. As these meetings progressed, a role was carved out for George that was meaningful to him, and valuable for the fire service. George was provided with a fire service uniform, name badge, email address and business card.

George became an ambassador for people with disabilities in the fire service. He did public presentations, both to the disability sector on fire safety, and to the fire-fighters on disability awareness. George's paid supporters and circle members supported him initially, but as he developed relationships with his colleagues, they began to take over the role of being supporters for George (natural supports). This culminated in them coming to collect George, and accompany him for 3 days to the state fire service conference, where he presented his work. George's dream came true. It was safeguarded by involving many people at many different levels, and dynamic in that it could move, develop, and reduce with George and his life demands.

### **Points to consider:**

Exploring the following questions WITH the person (and with people who are close to them such as family members or friends) may assist you to better understand the person:

- When is the person at their happiest?
- What does the person keep coming back to (talk about, want, enjoy)?
- What energizes or motivates them?
- What kinds of people is the person drawn to?
- What will the person sacrifice to do?
- What generates energy in the person?
- What satisfies them? (Michael Kendrick)

The most fundamental way to develop good connections, friendships and relationships is to get involved in the community and meet people! This can be done by:

- participating in community activities and projects
- joining groups and clubs
- volunteering
- socialising with one's family and neighbours
- getting a job.

# Who

Carefully identifying who to ask to be involved in someone's life increases the likelihood that the answer will be positive.

There needs to be a match between peoples' identified interests, passions, desires, or needs – between the person with a disability and the person being asked to be involved. The best people to ask for involvement are those that hold the necessary interest, influence, charisma and decision making power.

Equally, incidental people can offer a myriad of opportunities for further involvement in the community and relationship building. These opportunities can present themselves in often the most ordinary and habitual places – such as the supermarket, local cafés, and libraries. People you encounter at regular times, in regular places. These relationships too can be fostered and nurtured, and often community members are willing and wanting to develop these encounters further and will take the opportunity if offered.

A third point to consider when thinking about 'who' – is who is doing the asking. Some people are better skilled at approaching, discussing and asking for things than others. Often these people might have such character traits as enthusiasm, capacity to influence and inspire, be someone that people have trust and confidence in, and even possibly have a somewhat 'contagious personality'. In terms of identifying the path to the best outcome, being clear about who is the best person to ask the question is integral.

## Points to consider:

- What is the person with a disability's role in the asking process; who to ask, who does the asking, and defining the type of relationship?
- Often the major thing you are asking for is based on common interests, passions or concerns
- The 'first ask' may need to be something that can be a stepping stone to something more complex at a later stage and it needs to be something that is possible and achievable
- It's not just people with a disability who want to belong, other people in the community would often like to become involved with people and develop relationships (particularly with others who share a similar interest), so facilitating those opportunities is an important part of supporting a person with a disability
- Don't ask one individual to take on unreasonable expectations or to provide all the supports for a person with a disability.

# Where and when

What is the best time and place for the 'asking act' to take place that will maximise its potential for success? When you are asking for involvement from a community member who may have had little interaction with the person with a disability – getting the 'where and when' right can be critical.

People may need time to digest what is being asked of them, to ask their own questions, and think about their response. Hence a time that is free of other distractions or commitments is likely to increase the potential for success, as too is a place where the person being asked feels comfortable and free of other demands. A place of social value is also representative of the value of the question or involvement requested, and the contribution of the person with a disability, hence choosing a community venue that is respected is important.

- **Asking can be intentional: Phoning ahead and asking for a meeting. Arranging a place and time (ideally away from the work site if it is a worker doing the asking – e.g. a café), and agreeing a set time (e.g. 1 hour from 1pm-2pm)**
- **Asking can be spontaneous: e.g. being at the airport and asking someone nearby to assist by helping with travel bags, or to flag down a taxi, or on a tram, asking another waiting passenger if they could assist the person up the steps onto the tram.**

## Points to consider:

- Location can contribute significantly
- Timing is critical!
- Giving prior consideration to the above points can increase the result
- The person may need time to consider their answer or the involvement they can offer, it is important to ensure this is accommodated
- People in the community would often like to be of assistance – both spontaneously and intentionally, hence asking can be an important way for this to occur
- People should be given permission to say no.

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